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Overline House
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11 August 2008

Dear Lyn

Proposed changes to ticket office hours at South West Trains (SWT) stations

Thank you for your letter of 14 July, addressed to my colleague Tim Bellenger, giving details of these proposals and of your company's reasons for putting them forward. Tim is currently abroad, so I am responding in his absence.

The proposals were considered by the members of our Fares & Ticketing Committee at its meeting last week. Our members also had available to them a summary of the responses we had by that date received from members of the traveling public and from various public and private bodies in our area of interest.

They were grateful to SWT for its frank admission that these proposals are driven solely by a desire for cost reduction by the company, and not by any considerations of passenger benefit. They noted that all of the data on sales trends is presented in percentage terms, making it impossible for us to determine whether there has been any real reduction in the number of ticket office transactions following the introduction of additional ticket vending machines. They also queried whether the (relative) growth in sales from machines had been concentrated primarily at Waterloo, where there are staff on hand to assist, and therefore of limited relevance to the situation likely to arise elsewhere.

I have to advise you that our members were far from being persuaded that a sufficient case had been made to justify reductions on the scale proposed, in part because they felt that insufficient assurances had been received from SWT about its staffing arrangements generally at the stations concerned. They felt that there is abundant evidence (not least in many of the public responses) that passengers welcome the visible presence of staff because of the contribution this makes to enhancing security, especially at less-busy times such as those at which SWT proposes to withdraw ticket counter service.

There is a widespread conviction that these proposals will result in stations becoming wholly unstaffed, and that this will result in an increase in vandalism and anti-social behaviour. It was seen as being particularly ironic that they are being made just as SWT is seeking to win credit through advertising the recruitment of rail community officers. A number of members of the public have told us of particular SWT ticket office employees whose professionalism and helpfulness do much to enhance the reputation of the company, and the loss of whose services would have the opposite effect.

London TravelWatch did not oppose in principle some similar proposals which were recently put forward by London Underground (though subsequently withdrawn), because they were made with the explicit purpose of allowing station staff to move out from behind windows into passenger-facing roles in which their reassuring presence would be more obvious and they would be better placed to give assistance when required. Our members simply did not feel that passengers generally would accept the argument (advanced in the section of your letter that deals with station security, and reiterated by ATOC representatives present at our meeting) that ticket selling is an entirely separate function, discussion on which can be divorced from consideration of station staffing issues in the round.

So our members sought assurances that staff will continue to be present at these stations; that they will be multi-functional, visible, and available to assist passengers generally (not merely those who have prearranged help via the assisted passengers reporting scheme); and that station facilities (such as lifts, toilets and waiting rooms) will continue to be available for passengers' use irrespective of whether ticket offices are open. They found themselves unable to understand the relevance of the assertion in your letter that "where there is no longer a member of staff available to provide suitable assistance the guard will, as now, help customers requiring assistance" to the situation facing such a passenger attempting to purchase a ticket (or requiring other help) at their station of origin before the arrival of the train. And they felt that the reference in your letter to CCTV and help points betrays a fundamental failure to appreciate that in the eyes of passengers such technology can only be an adjunct to the role of staff and not a substitute for it.

There are a number of other, specific issues arising from these proposals, some of which have been raised repeatedly in comments received from SWT users, which are of concern to our members.

- (a) They felt that given the nature of its network and the types of ticket it offers, it is unlikely that telesales will account for more than a small part of SWT's income, or that this is a realistic alternative for most of the types of transaction currently made at your stations. Nevertheless, if the company wishes more passengers to migrate to this facility, it must ensure that it has adequate capacity to meet demand. Our members' perception is that this is not currently the case, following the merger with East Midlands Trains, and assurances about how its shortcomings are to be addressed are required.
- (b) Despite previous requests, we have not yet received information about the exact range of destinations to which tickets are (or will be) offered by SWT's ticket vending machines, or about the exact range of ticket types (including advance purchase tickets) which they sell. Nor is it clear whether they offer tickets from origins other than the location of the machine - which is particularly important in London where many passengers buy add-ons to Travelcards - or whether they are able to handle the full range of discounts available (such as the various railcards, New Deal tickets, etc). Our members felt that if SWT continues to withhold these particulars, a referral should be made to the Office of Rail Regulation, requesting it to instruct SWT to provide the details sought.
- (c) Oyster pay-as-you-go ticketing is due to be introduced generally for travel on National Rail services in London within the next two years. And several of SWT's stations (including Waterloo) are due to be gated. Both of these factors will affect the volume and location of ticket sales, as will any decision by SWT to retail Oyster ticket products itself (for which we continue to press, and on which we urge SWT to reverse its negative stance, which is unique among London-area operators). Our members felt that it would be premature to take pre-emptive decisions about ticket office staffing now, when the effects of these changes have yet to become clear.
- (d) There is a lack of confidence in the reliability of ticket vending machines, coupled with concern that passengers who are genuinely unable to obtain tickets may nevertheless fall victim to the penalty fares scheme. Machines located in the open (because ticket offices are locked out of use) are perceived to be particularly vulnerable and, under unfavourable lighting conditions, their screens are difficult for those with less-than-perfect vision to read. They are very vulnerable to vandalism, and intimidating to users who are not familiar with them.

Our members noted that SWT claims that these machines have a 98% reliability record, and that given the scale of SWT's operations, for even 1 in 50 of its passengers paying by this means to be prevented from doing so must result in a large number of unsuccessful transactions. But our members also queried the definition of unreliability used for this purpose, whether it includes those which have defaulted to the no-change giving mode, whether (and which) faults are reported automatically, and the adequacy of the arrangements for restocking the machines with change and tickets at times when ticket offices are unstaffed (particularly evenings, weekends and early mornings). They also wish to know how revenue control staff will be able accurately to verify the claims of passengers who are travelling legitimately without tickets because of their inability to obtain the tickets they require at their point of origin.

- (e) We understand that SWT has committed itself to upgrading the capability of its ticket vending machines in a number of respects. These include the ability to issue tickets pre-ordered via the internet, the ability to issue monthly seasons, the ability to issue tickets for next-day travel, and (possibly) widening the range of destinations offered. Our members sought an assurance that these enhancements would be fully implemented before any revision of ticket office hours is pursued.
- (f) Reduction of ticket office hours is likely to increase demand at other times of day or week when ticket offices are still open. For example, if it is no longer possible to renew season tickets at weekends, Monday morning queues are likely to lengthen. Our members noted that SWT's proposals contain no commitment to ensuring that queueing times at busy times do not increase, e.g. by opening additional windows where available. They sought assurances regarding SWT's plans for managing queueing generally.

We are aware that SWT has modified its proposals in relation to some individual stations since they were first made, but at this stage we have not been able to examine these.

The specific stations in our area in relation to which we have received objections are

Addlestone	Esher	Oxshott
Ashford (Surrey)	Fulwell	Shepperton
Barnes	Hampton	St Margaret's
Berrylands	Hampton Court	Stoneleigh
Brentford	Hinchley Wood	Strawberry Hill
Chessington North	Hounslow	Sunbury
Clandon	London Road (Guildford)	Tolworth
Claygate	Malden Manor	Wandsworth Town
Cobham & Stoke d'Abernon	Mortlake	Woking
Earlsfield	Motspur Park	Worcester Park
Effingham Junction		

In the particular case of Brentford, we have received a detailed comment from a former member of London TravelWatch (Graham Larkbey) claiming that the information put out by SWT in support of its proposals is erroneous in a number of critical respects. This is included among the responses appended to this letter.

In the time allowed, it has not been possible for us to liaise as closely with Passenger Focus in the drafting of our respective organisations' responses to your proposals as we would, ideally, have wished. We are, however, aware in general terms of its objection to this application, and we are happy to associate ourselves with it.

I append a list of the organizations and individuals from whom we have received representations on this subject. The full text of their comments accompanies the hard copy of this letter.

Yours sincerely

John Cartledge
Deputy Chief Executive

Claygate Parish Council
Effingham Parish Council
Hinchley Wood Residents Association
Historic Royal Palaces
Sutton, London Borough of
Transport Salaried Staffs Association
Wandsworth, London Borough of

Aldridge, D
Allison, Jane
Angus, John
Armstrong, Eric
Atkins, Jacky
Bathurst, C
Botterill, John and Ann
Bulley, A
Childs, Doris
Clarke, Sue
Cockerill, Giles
Coleman, Katie
Constable, A
Damon, A
Daniells, Sophie
Dixon, A
Draper, Mark
Ellis, Christine
Emery, Margaret
Forster, Gemma
Foster, Stuart
Freeman, John
Gibbs, C
Gill, Denise
Goddard, Geraldine
Going, R
Gould, R
Gregory, Julia
Grice, Mr and Mrs David

Hall, E
Harris, L
Hayden, Zoe
Head, Christopher H
Head, S
Hebborn, Neil
Hillman, Harold
Imrie, Rob
Ingels, C
Innes, Rev David A
Jarvis, Richard and Hazel
Keefe, John
Kiely, Clare
Lamplagh, A
Langford, Maria
Larkbey, Graham
Le, Mark
Leggat, Pauline
Little, D
Llewellyn, M
MacIntyre, Jane and Ken
Marlow, David
Meade, Andrew
Moody, Jennifer
Morley, Nathan
Murray, M
Neal, Mrs
Neve, J
Owen, Penny

Parsons, Q D
Patrick, M
Pluthero, C M
Purcell, D
Richardson, Camilla
Riggs, S
Robertson, Tineke
Rudland, D
Ryder, David
Sawers, Caroline
Schwarz, T
Scott, Peter
Sharp, Margaret
Sheppard, Anthony
Sienkiewicz, Teresa
Smith, E
Stroud, A and S
Taylor MP, Ian
Turner, Janet
Tye, Philip
Walston, Stephen
Watt
Wear, P J
Wells, Andy
Wells, R
Widley, H
Wilson, Margaret
Wood, Andrew
Wright, Rebecca